



Are you in the loop?

In the late 1990s, Ken Adelman, a photographer with concerns about the environment, became involved in a unique project organized by the Sierra Club. Working with his wife, Gabrielle, a helicopter pilot, he took high-quality digital images of an 18-mile

stretch of the California coastline with the goal of protecting it against improper land development.

The success of that project got the two thinking: what if they photographed every single mile of the California coast and placed all the images on the Internet? Wouldn't

such a site become a powerful bit of evidence for any future squabbles between land developers and environmentally sensitive citizen groups?

Their efforts resulted in CaliforniaCoastline.org, a site that demonstrates how citizens can empower themselves with a simple idea. That's not the point of this story though:

what is important is how the site became one of the most popular on the Internet for a brief time.

In May 2003, singer Barbra Streisand learned that a detailed image of her home could be found on the site. She launched legal action against the couple, alleging infringement of privacy. The lawsuit became the focus of attention in chat rooms, blogs and mailing lists. Soon everyone wanted a virtual peek at her home. In a matter of hours, CaliforniaCoastline.org bloomed into the global consciousness, generating thousands of hits per hour. (Streisand lost the action and was ordered to pay court costs. You can see a copy of her cheque online.)

This story puts into perfect perspective the phenomenon of the infinite idea loop. Today, ideas, knowledge and discoveries can be instantly shared — and when they become a part of the loop, they travel like wildfire. Take the sport of zorbing, for example. Zorbers place themselves in a big round plastic ball and literally roll down a hill, head over heels. The zany activity has taken off and established a niche among hard-core extreme sports fanatics worldwide, thanks to the power of the global idea cycle.

This loop, however, can also have a negative im-

pact. Look at last fall's root-kit debacle involving Sony BMG, in which the company had to admit it placed software on music CDs that could damage a computer's system configuration — all in an effort to try to reduce music sharing. Various groups such as

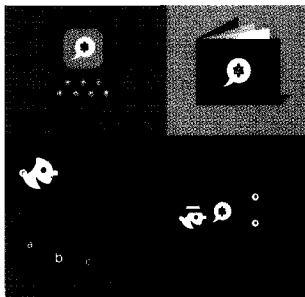
the Electronic Frontier Foundation went after the company, alleging it had no right to place potentially destructive software on customers' computers. The idea loop took over and Sony BMG quickly lost the PR battle and began to take steps to correct the problem.

This is not how things worked even a decade ago, when companies would plan for months to build awareness of a new product and PR campaigns lasted many weeks. Financial information was released on press wires and reviewed in the newspapers the next day. Doctors would enhance their knowledge through slow, cumbersome peer-reviewed medical publications that permitted the gradual and careful distribution of new discoveries.

No longer — everything is now instantaneous. Ideas and information can take off and have an impact before you even know about them. The future of your industry is already being discussed in various blogs. Empowered citizen groups are undertaking activities that might affect your plans five years out.

If you aren't plugged in and don't change at the furious pace the world demands today, you'll likely find you can barely keep up with what the idea cycle is doing.

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IDEA CYCLE AT WORK

California Coastal Records Project
www.CaliforniaCoastline.org

Zorbing www.zorb.com

Electronic Frontier Foundation
www.eff.org/IP/DRM/Sony-BMG

Sony root-kit information <http://blog.sonymusic.com/sonybm/archives/111505.html>